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Changing Civil-Military Relations in Turkey: The Turkish Military's Decreasing Influence and Implications for the Middle East and NATO

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Introduction

The Turkish military's traditionally powerful role in Turkey's domestic, foreign and security policy is undergoing a transformation. Domestic and international forces are making the military increasingly subject to civilian control, reducing its previously unique and authoritative role. While this is a positive step in the country's democratization process, it is also an important shift in the role of Turkey's long-time 'guardian of secularism.' The staunchly secular military's views are increasingly differing from the popular Justice and Development Party (JDP) – Turkey's first Islamic-rooted single party government, elected in 2002, and re-elected in 2007. Since 2002, there has been a slow but significant transformation of the old order and a radical shift in the balance of power from the military towards the civilians.¹ The profound transformation of Turkish society, the end of the Cold War, Turkey's ambitions to join the European Union (EU), and various other domestic and international factors are also contributing to this change.

With the decreasing role of the military and the increasing role of the civilian government, Turkey is able to pursue a different foreign and security policy in Middle East, which entails becoming closer to Iran and Syria. In the same way, the civilian government is becoming more self-confident and assertive within NATO, in which Turkey is the second largest force. What are the domestic and international factors that are weakening the military's grip on power? How are

the views of the military and government diverging? What exactly are the implications for the Middle East, NATO and the EU?

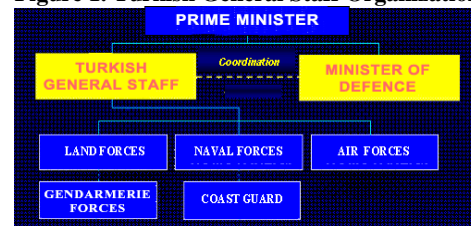
The Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and its Traditional Role

Since the Turkish Republic's founding 88 years ago, the military has been a powerful institution and the unquestioned guardian of the secular republic founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.²

Starting in 1960, the military conducted coups d'état almost every decade, removing administrations which it deemed a threat to the secular nature of Turkey or deviated from its constitution.³ All the coups (1960, 1971, 1980 and a 'soft-coup' on 28 February 1997, in which the military forced the government to resign) resulted in a change of government. Regardless of the political party in power, the TAF maintained its control over the state system and its authority to have the last word.⁴ In 1982, the military drafted the country's constitution, giving itself wide room for maneuver to shape both the domestic and foreign policy of the country. Though this constitution has seen many amendments, it still remains in force today. However, there is a broad debate on the need for an urgent re-write.

This military-drafted constitution gave the military the ability to define and deal with internal threats. In particular, these internal threats were defined by the military as 'fundamental Islamic tendencies,' and those which threatened the 'indivisible unity of the nation state.'⁵ The 1982 constitution also made the military accountable to the Prime Minister,

Figure 1. Turkish General Staff Organization



Source: [The Turkish General Staff Website](#)

and not to the Secretary of Defense, an organization structure that is still the case today. In fact, Turkey is the only NATO member whose chief of the general staff is answerable to the prime minister and not the defense minister (Figure 1).⁶

The military has traditionally and historically been the institution that protects and upholds Atatürk's principles. Atatürk is not only considered the founder of the republic, but also the savior of the country from western allies at the end of World War I. He also abolished the Caliphate in Turkey, establishing Turkey as a secular democracy, with a western style dress code, alphabet and western civil laws. As the guardian of the principles of Atatürk – the most revered figure in Turkey to this day – the army is still an important institution in Turkey. However, the last decade has seen significant changes that have resulted in the reduction of the military's previous role as the shaper of its domestic, security and foreign policy.

Domestic Factors Limiting the Military's Influence

A Single Party Government and the JDP's Consolidation of Power: The November 3, 2002 elections brought the Islamic- rooted (JDP) to power with a clear majority. The outcome of the elections meant that Turkey would have a popular single party government for the first time in over a decade. This marked the end of an era in Turkish politics defined by political fragmentation. The JDP consolidated power and made it clear that the military was subservient to the government and not the other way around. The JDP government made deliberate attempts to create more space for its own administration and defy previous policies that stood in the way of Turkey's integration into the EU.

With its new vision for Turkey and comprehensive foreign policy initiatives, the JDP redefined Turkey's positions on issues that the military had previously dictated or shaped. To fortify its position as the main security policy-maker, the JDP revised the National Security Policy Document (NSPD) in 2010. This revision is consistent with the JDP's new vision for Turkey in contrast to previously-written NSPDs that entailed 'action plans' and threats of the military's use of force as part of Turkey's foreign policy. The JDP declared Turkey's membership in the EU as one of its main foreign policy goals. The military on the other hand, perceived the JDP as an indirect threat to secularism, and did not acknowledge that the greatest shield against any threats to secularism would be the EU and not its own interference. In addition, its views differed from those of the JDP government on what constitutes an internal threat, and whether the TAF should deal with internal threats as it had done before or if its role should be limited to protection against external threats. As prominent Turkey-expert Yasemin Çongar explains, "In Turkey, the elected governments have never been the real power. That's what's changing now. It's kind of an unwritten law that they always abide by the military. It's the founder of the republic, guardian of the regime, guardian of secularism. Now that's changing a bit. But it's a very hard process."⁷

The 2007 'e-Coup': The military's perception of the JDP as a threat to secularism led to its most recent intervention in Turkish domestic politics – the election of the President. In parliamentary voting during the Presidential elections of 2007, then foreign minister Abdullah Gül came 10 votes short of becoming Turkey's first Islamic-rooted president. This outcome required a second round of voting, and signaled a high probability that Gül would be voted president on the second round.⁸ The military was alarmed at the possibility of Gül becoming president – an office which is considered 'the last bastion of secularism' in Turkey, due to the veto power of the president

over the parliament. Gül's presidency would mean that Islamic-rooted political interests in Turkey would control not only the legislative and executive branches of government, but also wield significant influence over the judiciary and the military. The TAF's reaction came in an unsigned statement posted late that evening on their website, and was interpreted as a coup threat. The statement read, "The Turkish Armed Forces are watching the [Presidential election process] with concern. It should not be forgotten that, the Turkish Armed Forces is party to these discussions and is the absolute guardian of secularism. Moreover, the Turkish Armed Forces ... will demonstrate its attitude and actions in a clear manner when the time comes. Nobody should doubt this."⁹ This was called an 'e-Coup' or a 'virtual coup.'

This 'e-Coup' was perceived very differently from previous coups. Although their position did reflect the views of a secular group in Turkey, the military also angered the public with its veiled coup threat. Experts argued that the 'coup warning' issued by the TAF had taken Turkey back at least ten years and that democracy could not function under constant coup threats.¹⁰ Others accused the army of being suspicious not just of the JDP, but of democracy; and mistrusting their own people. The public

viewed the military's move as having worsened Turkey's prospects for EU membership.¹¹

Others voiced concern that the military's interventions were 'hampering the institutionalization of the democratic process,' by allowing the opposition to become lazy. The argument went that if the opposition parties knew that the army was going to do the job of removing governments, they did not have an incentive to form an effective opposition on their own. People began

Figure 2: About One Million Turks Take to the Streets on 29 April 2007: "No sharia, no coup, [we want] a democratic Turkey."



Source: hurriyet.com

viewing the military as a counterproductive force which ‘saved’ the opposition from doing its job.

The ‘e-Coup’ or ‘midnight memo’ eroded the military’s power and made them appear out-of-touch with the changing political realities in Turkey. This time the military appeared to have intervened with a much more modern and western government. Anger started brewing among Muslims who had voted for the JDP.¹² The statements that best summarized the general public’s stance were the slogans they chanted on 29 April 2007 – the day after the ‘e-coup’ – when about a million people took to the streets: “No sharia, no coup, [we want] a democratic Turkey”; “Turkey is secular and will remain secular” (Figure 2). The ‘e-Coup’ not only angered the public, but also generated a reaction from the government. The day after the on-line posting, then-Speaker of Parliament Cemil Çiçek said, “It is unthinkable for the Chief of Staff’s Office – an institution under the Prime Minister – to speak against the government in a democratic state with the rule of law.”¹³ This signaled the military’s loss of control over the government.

‘Ergenekon’ and ‘Sledgehammer’: These public reactions were an indication of the profound change in Turkish society. An increasingly assertive and confident public, including democracy advocates, headscarf-wearing Muslim women, journalists and others started complaining that the military’s ways to keep its grip on power had become unacceptable.¹⁴ Shortly after the unpopular ‘e-Coup,’ conspiracy theories about secret networks involving the military’s alleged plots to overthrow the government abounded. This further tarnished the reputation of the once-unchallenged military.

The ‘Ergenekon’ network, uncovered in June of 2007, is allegedly a network of military members and civilians who conspired to create chaos in society, laying the groundwork for and then justifying a coup to overthrow the JDP government.¹⁵ Documents gathered in the Ergenekon-related investigation revealed that the organization was originally established to act within the TAF, but re-organized itself in 1999 expanding its scope to include civilian elements as well. Around 200 suspects, including retired generals and colonels as well as academics and journalists have been or are currently being tried for being a member of the organization.¹⁶ A similar and more-recently uncovered case involves the arrests of 49 retired and active duty officers (including two force commanders and a deputy chief of staff) for conspiring to overthrow the Turkish government in 2003 as part of an alleged plan named ‘Sledgehammer.’

The Rise of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs): The increasing role of NGOs and interest groups in Turkey, particularly the main business association, the Turkish Industrialists’ and Businessmen’s Association (TÜSİAD) and the Chambers of Commerce (TOBB) called for economic factors to be taken into account in the foreign and security policy-making of the country. Their debates caused the public to re-define what ‘national interest’ meant. In the past, the concept of ‘national interest’ was defined in terms of security considerations. TÜSİAD called for ‘less geopolitics, more economics,’ reminding the military to consider the consequences of their interferences on the economy.¹⁷

International Factors Limiting the Military’s Influence

European Union (EU) Reforms: In December 1999, the Helsinki Summit confirmed Turkey's candidacy in the EU. As part of this effort, Turkey was forced to harmonize its laws according to EU regulations. The EU demanded that Turkey implement 'civilian control over the military.' The criticism was that the military exerted too much power over areas that were not in its jurisdiction. This process induced legal reforms which significantly limited the military's role. The reforms entailed the following: the transformation of the role and composition of the National Security Council, reducing the number of military members; the transparency of the defense budget; the removal of military representatives from civilian boards, and an amendment concerning military courts.¹⁸ The most important change among these were changes made to the National Security Council, which had been the primary channel through which the officers influenced Turkish politics. Basically, the legal reforms removed the bureaucratic mechanisms that previously allowed the military to exert influence over both domestic and foreign-policy-making in Turkey.

The Post-Cold War World Order: After the Cold War, the Turkish military continued to see the world in bi-polar terms. It was late in acknowledging that the new world order placed greater importance on democracy, human rights, and countering newly-arising threats from non-state actors, terrorism and militant radical insurgencies.¹⁹ It was criticized for not realizing that Turkey was transforming into a 'freedom-oriented democracy' and moving away from a 'security-oriented democracy.' Even though the JDP government was elected in 2002 with a wide majority, and re-elected again in 2007, the TAF continued to view it as a threat to the country, partly alienating the JDP's huge constituency.

Changes in Turkey – U.S. Relations: The end of the Cold War also transformed relations between Turkey and the U.S. During the Cold War, Turkey had geopolitical importance for the U.S. because of *where* it was – at the front lines of the communist threat and as the southern flank of NATO. This changed after the end of the Cold War and in particular after the September 11, 2001 attacks. At this point, Turkey became important for *what* it was – a secular democratic Muslim country, to be pitted against the ‘clash of civilizations;’ and closely watched by countries like Pakistan and Indonesia, where the army is strong.

The 2003 Iraq War and the infamous 1 March 2003 resolution caused significant damage to relations. The Turkish parliament’s refusal to allow U.S. troops to use Turkish territory greatly damaged the relationship between the countries, particularly between the Pentagon and the TAF. Some in the Pentagon viewed the TAF as not having exerted its influence to force the passage of the resolution. Turkey’s decision not to get involved in the Iraq War also reduced the TAF’s influence in Northern Iraq.²⁰ Thus, the Turkish military lost its ability to shape the country’s most pressing foreign policy issue – Turkey’s policies regarding the Kurds in Northern Iraq – over which it had been able to exert its influence for over a decade.

Areas of Divergence between the Government and Military

JDP’s New Security and Foreign Policy Vision for Turkey: The JDP’s new vision claims that Turkey needs to be at peace with its Muslim identity and have ‘a sense of grandeur and self-confidence.’ This entails embracing its Ottoman past, establishing good cultural and economic ties with neighbors, pursuing a pro-active peace diplomacy with a view to achieve their stated

goal of ‘zero problems with [our] neighbors.’ Previous policies, partly shaped by the military, were based on threat perceptions and viewed Turkey as a ‘lone wolf,’ in a hostile region. Such perceptions had led Turkey to isolate itself from its neighbors, causing it only to react to their policies and take a more coercive tone. The military has reluctantly and slowly acknowledged this change. As the new Chief of the General Staff Işık Koşaner said in his inaugural speech in 2010, “..The concept of security is expanding from being one based solely on defending the country’s territory to one being based on economic, diplomatic, cultural and technological aspects.”²¹

Iran: The civilian government’s new foreign policy of ‘zero problems with our neighbors’ moves it closer Iran and Syria. The government recently removed them from its ‘Red Book,’ its official policy paper defining foreign security threats. In the latest debate on the proposed missile defense shield, Turkey refused to host a missile shield that explicitly identified Iran as a potential attacker. Turkey’s President Abdullah Gül stated in a recent interview with the BBC’s Turkish service, “...Mentioning one country, Iran... is wrong and will not happen. A particular country will not be [identified]... We will definitely not accept that.” Moreover, he insisted that Israel should not be given access to the proposed missile defense network. “Israel is not a member of NATO, and any cooperation is not a point in issue... I explicitly say that in principle this is not possible.”²² This is the first time, since joining NATO in 1952, that Turkey has challenged a NATO initiative.²³ Turkey also voted ‘no’ to further sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council in June 2010, arguing that this was the only way to keep Iran from ‘leaving the negotiation table.’²⁴

This is an important strategic shift in Turkey's position within NATO where a nuclear Iran is considered a serious threat. Ian Lesser, a senior Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund in Washington D.C. has claimed that Turkish policymakers are 'in denial' regarding the nature of proliferation risks on Turkey's borders.²⁵ In fact, despite Turkey's exposure to WMD and missile risks from the Middle East, the JDP government has remained relatively unconcerned, adopting a 'surprisingly nonchalant attitude,' toward the threat. The reason that the government's perception of threat from Iran has been low is that they find it difficult to imagine circumstances under which Iran would employ such weapons against Turkey.²⁶

In contrast, the military is more focused on the security threats that a nuclear Iran would create and concerned about possible armed conflict in the region. Their fears are three-fold. First, this would complicate Turkey's security relationships with the U.S., Israel and Europe. Second, a possible Western or Israeli intervention in Iran would place them in a precarious position between its allies and neighbors, where the Turkish military would play a role analogous to Germany during the Cold War. Third, the TAF fears that such a development may make Turkey a possible transit route for smuggling nuclear materials and technology, across its border with Iran. This would divert the TAF's attention and resources from other threats that it considers more urgent, such as the PKK problem.²⁷

Though the government's policy on Iran represents an important shift in Turkey's position within NATO, it should be noted that this is not the case for all alliance initiatives. Most importantly, Turkey is still a cooperating partner in Afghanistan. According to NATO's official facts and figures for Afghanistan, Turkey was contributing approximately 1755 troops to the

ISAF force as of 1 February 2010.²⁸ Previously, Turkey has twice assumed command of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).²⁹

Israel: The JDP's new foreign policy which requires engagement with its Arab neighbors, also necessitates a more vocal criticism of Israel and a more sensitive tone to the Palestinian issue. Israel's decision to continue building settlements instead of reviving the peace process, followed by its attack on Lebanon in 2006, then on Gaza at the end of 2008, continuing into early 2009, caused the Turkish government to become critical of Israel. Relations hit a critical low during the 'flotilla crisis' of May 2010. The Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül's harsh words indicated that Israel was no longer a friend or ally of Turkey.

Military officials' comments have focused more on damage control, highlighting the positive steps that Israel took to address Turkey's concerns following the incident.³⁰ The fact is that the military appreciates know-how it gains from Israel, in dealing with the PKK. Even when diplomatic relations hit rock bottom following the 'flotilla incident,' military relations quietly continued. Within weeks of the flotilla raid, a Turkish military delegation arrived in Israel to learn how to operate the same pilotless aircraft used by Israel to hunt Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip. The \$190 million deal for the drones was not canceled, even as the Israeli instructors in Turkey were called home after the raid.³¹

EU Reforms and Membership: EU reforms stipulated changes that transformed the military's status. Though the majority of Turks and the government advocated EU membership, the

military initially viewed this as a dangerous development. In 2005, during the earlier stages of the process, TAF's statements and briefings demonstrated challenged EU membership, which threatened its privileged and autonomous status. EU demands that the military should be answerable to the defense ministry, are still causing a stir in the military. The TAF claims that it is in a unique position compared to other European militaries and that it cannot be subject to the same rules.³² The new Chief of the General Staff Işık Koşaner said in his inaugural speech in 2010 – the military's most current positions on issues – “The TAF cannot be compared to the armed forces of any other country due to our country's geographic location, its proximity to crisis zones, the threats and risks it faces, its socio-cultural structure; and the national and sentimental values of our public.”³³

In the words of retired general Armağan Kuloğlu, “Let them subordinate the army to the ministry of sports if they want...The army will still do what it needs to do.”³⁴ Instead of viewing the EU as a development that would improve democracy and human rights, the military saw it as a threat. This alienated the TAF from the majority of the public, who were excited about Turkey's EU aspirations. More recently, the TAF has adopted a more ambiguous approach to the issue.

The Kurds: In its efforts to comply with EU regulations, the JDP government has recently taken initiatives to address the Kurds' long standing demands for greater cultural and political rights. These include a possible revision of the constitution which would include some devolution of power to local authorities, broadcasting in Kurdish and allowing the Kurdish language to be taught in schools in the southeast, where most Kurds live. In contrast, the military continues to

view the Kurds' demands as a threat to the country's stability and the 'indivisible unitary nation state' and publicly frowns upon such initiatives.³⁵

In his inaugural speech, the Chief of the General Staff Koşaner said, "Different ethnic groups continue to remain sensitive issues for the country's stability...What makes a nation state are common values such as language, culture and united principles... In a unitary state...the same laws are applied equally everywhere. Public services are carried out by local authorities based on the central government's direction."³⁶ Framing the issue in this manner is significant because the army's own regulations call for it to intervene when 'the indivisible unity of the state' is at risk.³⁷ This discourse implies that the military considers this to be within its authority and that it disapproves the government's policies on this internal issue.

Cyprus: The JDP government realizes that the continued division of the island of Cyprus is an obstacle to Turkey's efforts to join the EU. As the accession of a new member state can only be unanimously decided by the EU member states, Greek and Greek Cypriot consent are separately necessary for Turkish membership. The JDP acknowledges that it is highly unlikely that the Greek Cypriot government would agree to the Turkish accession while Cyprus remains a divided island and Turkish troops remained stationed in the north.³⁸ As such, it supports UN plans for a peaceful reunification of the island as a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation which would be a single international entity.³⁹ This is also in line with EU demands, which stipulate that Turkish troops immediately start withdrawing from Cyprus. In contrast, the military claims that the solution should be based on the principle of 'two communities, two democracies,' such that sovereignty rests with the constituent states as opposed to a central government. On the issue of

the Turkish troops in the north, the military's position, as stated in 2010 by the new Chief of Staff is, "The continuation of Turkey's military presence [in northern Cyprus] is a central security issue, and it is out of the question to even debate this."⁴⁰

Conclusion

The Turkish military's role has been undergoing a significant transformation in the last decade. In the past, it was accepted as the country's most powerful institution, and its self-appointed 'guardian of secularism.' Its control over civilian governments and its ability to overthrow governments were unquestioned.

Prior to 2002, domestic upsets and perceived threats to the country's secularism had required the military to play a greater role than that of western militaries. However, in 2002, the popular Islamic-rooted JDP government became the first single-party government to come to power in over a decade, allowing them to consolidate power. Naturally, the views of the staunchly secular military and those of an Islamic-rooted government, increasingly diverged. This development, along with changing institutional dynamics, the transformation of Turkish society are weakening the military's grip on the country's politics.

Though still considered an important institution, the military's influence in shaping the country's internal affairs; and its foreign and security policies towards the Middle East and within NATO are being greatly curbed. International realities such as Turkey's EU accession process, the end of the Cold War, and changes in Turkey's foreign policy are further fuelling this process. It

remains to be seen whether this significant shift of power from the military to civilian authorities will propel Turkey from a democratic government to a true democratic regime.

ENDNOTES

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³³ “General Işık Koşaner’s Speech at the Chief of Staff’s Transfer of Duty Ceremony,” *The Official Website of the Turkish Armed Forces*, August 27, 2010:

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³⁴ Unsigned. “The Turkish Army: Coups Away.” *The Economist*, February 11, 2010. <http://www.economist.com/node/15505946>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “General Işık Koşaner’s Speech at the Chief of Staff’s Transfer of Duty Ceremony,” *The Official Website of the Turkish Armed Forces*, August 27, 2010:

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³⁷ Unsigned. “The Turkish Army: Coups Away.” *The Economist*, February 11, 2010. <http://www.economist.com/node/15505946>.

³⁸ It is not possible to give an exact number of Turkish military personnel serving in northern Cyprus, due to conflicting public sources of information.

³⁹ Güven, Erdal. “AKP, Kıbrıs İçin Ne Diyor? (What does the JDP Say about Cyprus?).” *Radikal*, November 8, 2002: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=55876> (accessed January 2, 2011).

⁴⁰ “General Işık Koşaner’s Speech at the Chief of Staff’s Transfer of Duty Ceremony,” *The Official Website of the Turkish Armed Forces*, August 27, 2010:

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